

EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION (EUSDR)

Feedback from the kick-off Steering Group meetings

The implementation of the EUSDR has now started. Overall, Priority Area Coordinators, members of the Steering Groups, the Commission DGs and inter-governmental bodies **understand that time now is the time to move to concrete actions.**

- **Kick-off Steering Groups:** All the Steering Groups have taken place. The operational DGs were generally present (DG Environment, DG Energy, etc.). DG Regional Policy highlighted that **having a Steering Group is already an important step forward:** it is a platform to discuss the common challenges, agree on common actions and implement common projects.

Steering Groups have **agreed on the rules of procedures.** The main features are: the purpose of the Steering Group is to **take the decisions** regarding the Priority Area (how to implement actions - who does what, when, where, how -; support to projects, organisation of seminars to involve stakeholders, approval of the annual report to the Commission, etc.), decisions are taken by **consensus**; there are at least **two Steering Groups per year**; and the Commission - and where relevant the ICPDR - are **permanent observers.**

The main concern is that **not all countries were present** at the kick-off meeting with an average of 7 countries present.

- **Projects:** Most of the Steering Groups have **agreed on a time schedule for the generation of new projects:** by end of July the Danube countries make project **proposals** (according to a **template** agreed in the kick-off meetings of the Steering Groups), by beginning of September the Priority Area Coordinators make a **pre-assessment** of the projects (according to **selection criteria** agreed in the kick-off meetings of the Steering Groups), by end of October the Steering Groups will support the projects by issuing a **'letter of recommendations'** (see § 'Financing').
- **Targets:** The targets were **systematically discussed.** The targets proposed as examples by the Commission in the Communication could be either maintained as such, or amended, or replaced, or completed with additional ones. The Priority Area Coordinators have been invited to **confirm - by 30 June - what are the targets proposed** for the Priority Area concerned. Many have already done so, although the most contentious (inc "navigability", where there is however significant progress) may require some more weeks.
- **Financing:** The access to financing was explained. The projects which contribute to the objectives of the EUSDR could be given **priority in the selection process** by funding bodies. Concretely, the projects considered good by the Steering Groups could be granted a **'letter of recommendation'** with which the project leader could go to the different funding sources. As the 'letter of recommendation' will show the support by the Danube Countries, it would provide priority to the project in the access to funds. DG Regional Policy will inform the Structural Funds programmes that when they receive a project with a 'letter of recommendation', they could provide priority to it.



- Role of the ICPDR: This has been discussed with DG ENV, the ICPDR and the Steering Groups concerned. The basic principles are that the **EUSDR does not substitute the ICPDR**, that there should be **no duplication of the work**, that there should be **no diverging decisions**. However, there should be **synergies and mutual support**. Both the ICPDR and the EUSDR can benefit from each other: the **ICPDR is a strong decision-making body** (legal basis, experienced inter-governmental body, countries represented at high level, Commission is a member, etc.) and the **EUSDR can make the link to the funding of projects**. Concretely, those actions where the action leader is the ICPDR should be implemented by the ICPDR, those which are not within the scope of the ICPDR should be implemented by action leaders to be decided by the Steering Groups and those actions which have to be shared should be further discussed between the ICPDR and the relevant Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) to decide who does what in detail. In any case, this requires a good flow of information between the ICPDR and PACs: invitation to each others' meetings and informal/ regular contacts.
- Deliverables: The Commission will have to report back to the Council in December 2012, meaning that the first report from the Steering Groups is due by June 2012. The deliverables - by **June 2012** - given to the Steering Groups are the following: (1) **Each action is broken down in operational steps** (milestones, responsible and deadlines); (2) A certain number of **new projects** are identified (with project leaders), for example 3 to be decided by the Steering Groups; (3) A certain number of **existing projects** are identified (to build on them further), for example 10 to be decided by the Steering Groups; (4) The **SG has met at a reasonable frequency**, for example 2 times between June 2010 and June 2011; (5) A **seminar has been organised with the stakeholders** (NGOs, regional and local authorities, private sector, civil society, etc.); and (6) There is a **website** in place.
- Technical Assistance: The procedures to contract the Technical Assistance with the Priority Area Coordinators is ongoing and the funds should be available to them in the **December** (approximately **EUR 200.000** per Priority Area and an additional EUR 275.000 to those Priority Areas where a specific project is foreseen such as the Danube Innovation Fund). The administrative procedures connected with this are however very onerous, and allocating staff an issue, which may mean delays.
- High-Level Group: A High-Level Group of senior officials has to be convened in the **autumn**, namely to discuss the targets. Member States will be asked to nominate representatives. Linkages to the existing Baltic HLG should be encouraged.